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RELATION OF SCHOOL EXPANSION TO READING

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The instruction in reading which is given in the elementary schools of today is a mixture of indefensible traditional practices and efforts at reconstruction. Certain reforms have been made and partly carried through, but there still remains much to remind us of practices which were current two generations ago. Even the reforms which have been introduced are only half understood by many teachers, with the result that reading in the schools is by no means as effective as it must be made if it is to fit modern demands. Reading, the first and most important of the three R's, supplies as striking an example as can be found of the need, which was stated in the first paper of this series, of a radical overhauling of the elementary school.

Before turning to school practices, it may be well to consider certain facts of the general life of the United States which are directly related to the teaching of reading. These facts show the significance to the individual and to society at large of the success or unsuccess of the schools in this work.

A very illuminating graph can be drawn from figures supplied by the Bureau of the Census¹ showing the number of issues of newspapers and periodicals published in the United States in different years. This graph is shown in Figure 1. The corresponding graph for increase in population is shown in Figure 2.

A comparison of these graphs and attention to the sudden change which takes place in the rate of increase in the publication of newspapers and periodicals subsequent to 1880, cannot fail to

¹ Figures for the dates prior to 1880 are taken from the *History and Present Condition of the Newspaper and Periodical Press of the United States with a Catalogue of the Publications of the Census Year. Tenth Census of the United States*, Vol. VIII. Compiled by S. N. D. North. Washington: Department of the Interior, Census Office, 1884. Figures for subsequent dates are taken from the later census reports.

impress the student of American intellectual institutions. It is perfectly clear that reading becomes a very much more common fact in the years following 1880 than it ever was before. It is also clear that the impetus toward extensive reading has continued to operate since 1880 with constantly increasing effect.

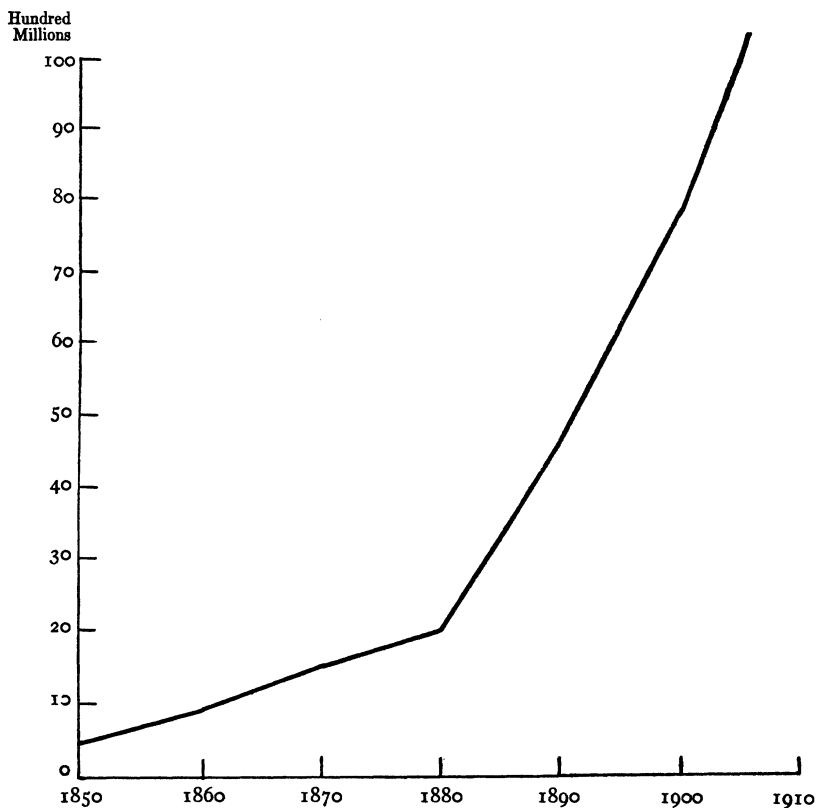


FIG. 1.—Number of issues of newspapers and periodicals published in various years.

The importance of this fact as describing the special character of the civilization of the United States is further brought out by the statement that in 1910 there were published in this country over 18,000 periodicals of all kinds. Of this number 2,226 were daily papers. The total number of periodicals published in the world during that year was less than 50,000. Germany had 7,000,

Great Britain 9,000, Japan 4,300, and other countries smaller numbers.

Some of the objective reasons for the development of American periodical publications are mentioned by the author of the special census report on newspapers and periodicals. He writes:

This sketch of the rise and development of the American newspaper has now reached the period of time which marks the commencement of the third and present era in its history. It is not possible to assign the beginning of this era to any particular year or event, its coming being due to a variety of



FIG. 2.—Number of inhabitants in the United States according to the decennial census.

causes, which may be enumerated in the following order: First, the establishment of the penny press; second, the development of railroads as a means for the distribution of newspapers, the transmission of news reports, and the reduction of heavy postage rates; third, the discovery of telegraphy, and its immediate application to the purposes of journalism; and fourth, but not less important than other causes, the improvements of the printing press, which have rendered it possible to print large editions of newspapers in a short time.¹

Before commenting on the significance of these facts for education, it will be well to include in our discussion certain statistics

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

which show that the more general use of reading has been accompanied by an equal demand for the mastery of the second of the three R's, namely, writing.

A very definite knowledge of the extent to which writing has gained ground as a common art in the last three-quarters of a century can be obtained from an examination of the statistics of the post-office. If we take all of the money paid for letter postage in 1843 and assume that it was spent for the cheapest letter that could be forwarded through the mails, it will be found that the average letter writing of each inhabitant of the United States during the full year amounted to less than four letters of one sheet each. This estimate is altogether extravagant because the lowest letter postage of that date, namely, six cents, would carry only one sheet of paper within a radius of thirty miles. If letters went more than thirty miles, or were made up of more than one sheet, they cost more, reaching a maximum at four hundred miles or more, when each sheet cost twenty-five cents. Letters sent at rates of postage higher than the minimum would reduce the average computed. It is fair to assume, therefore, that letter writing in 1843 was not a common practice.

Other facts of the same import are as follows: In 1840 the revenue of the post-office for all classes of mail was twenty-seven cents per year for each inhabitant of the United States. This amount had not doubled in 1870, when it was forty-nine cents. It rose to the point where in 1890 it was \$0.97; in 1900, \$1.34; and in 1910, \$2.43. Not all of this was for letters, but the figures show that reading and writing are much more commonly used today than a generation ago. This conclusion is overwhelming when account is taken of the steady reduction in rates which has characterized the history of the post-office.

Such statistics emphasize the fact that our modern life is utterly dependent on means of communication. This social fact is not merely an external material fact; it has to do with human habits and human education. It has to do with the common expectations of life. There was a time, not very far back in the history of this nation, when writing was not thought of as essential to the practical equipment of a man. Indeed, if we consider only the most highly

authentic figures on this matter, we find that in 1880 17 per cent of our population could not write or read. Back of this date the statistics are largely matters of speculation, but it is certain that the percentage increases rapidly. We find, for example, in a message of Governor Campbell to the legislature of Virginia in 1839 the statement that "almost one-quarter part of the men applying for marriage licenses were unable to write their names." If we go a little farther back, the fraction of illiterates undoubtedly puts in the majority those who do not command the art.

The attitude of modern society is such that a percentage of illiteracy as high as even that of 1880 is wholly intolerable. Today no man will willingly admit that he cannot read or write. The expectation of the nation is that all of its members are to go to school long enough to be part of a common social whole which is held together by written and printed means of communication.

With regard to reading, modern expectations are even more far-reaching than are those with regard to writing. Public signs are used on every hand on the assumption that all who make use of the streets will be able to follow written directions. The man who cannot read can hardly take care of himself in a crowded city.

If one stops to translate these various expectations into definite terms regarding education, one begins to realize that the modern school has a task which the old-fashioned school with its simple expectations never faced. The school of 1840, with its brief period of contact with the pupils, with its untrained teachers, with its meager supply of books, and with its inadequate schoolrooms, was not a place where the type of fluent reading and writing demanded by modern society could in most cases be imparted.

Such statements about the schools of the last century can be abundantly verified by reference to contemporary literature. Thus in 1838 Horace Mann, in his second report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, wrote:

I have devoted especial pains to learn, with some degree of numerical accuracy, how far the reading, in our schools, is an exercise of the mind in thinking and feeling, and how far it is a barren action of the organs of speech upon the atmosphere. My information is derived, principally, from the written statements of the school committees of the respective towns,—gentlemen who are certainly exempt from all temptation to disparage the schools they

superintend. The result is, that more than eleven-twelfths of all the children in the reading-classes, in our schools, do not understand the meaning of the words they read; that they do not master the sense of the reading-lessons, and that the ideas and feelings intended by the author to be conveyed to, and excited in, the reader's mind, still rest in the author's intention, never having yet reached the place of their destination.¹

The major part of the report from which the foregoing passage is quoted is devoted to a discussion of the reasons for this deficiency in reading ability. Mann finds that one important reason for the failure of pupils of that day is to be found in the emphasis laid in instruction on formal spelling and mere pronunciation. A quotation from a later part of the report reveals the practices of that time and also one important reason why instruction in reading was ineffective. The quotation is as follows:

Another device to fill vacuity by pouring in vacuity, is this:—a book is prepared, in which the spelling and reading lessons alternate. First come a few columns of words, and then a page of apothegms and synopses of universal truths, not occupying, perhaps, more than a line each; some one word in the spelling-columns being incorporated into each of these short sentences. The force of the reasons against the preceding mode is but little abated when applied to this. This motley company of sentences repels all interest on the part of the learner. Topics, more alien from each other, and more bewildering to the mind, could not be found, if one were to stick a pin through all the leaves of a book, and then to read continuously all the sentences through which the puncture was made. As many-colored and diverse-shaped objects, flitting swiftly before the eye, will make no stable impression upon the retina; so a multitude of incongruous ideas and feelings, trooping hurriedly before the mental vision, can leave no enduring traces of outline, aspect or quality upon the mind. A rapid succession of discordant images will inflict distraction upon the mind of an adult;—how much more certain are they to do it upon that of a child! The power of passing abruptly from one subject of thought to another, without mental disturbance, requires long habit and familiarity with the matters presented. Children can have neither.²

Another reason is to be found in the inappropriate character of the reading exercises offered to children.

And yet, in many of the reading-books now in use in the schools, the most pithy sayings of learned men; the aphorisms in which moralists have deposited

¹Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts for the years 1837-1838, p. 531. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1891.

²*Ibid.*, p. 551.

a life of observation and experience; the maxims of philosophers, embodying the highest forms of intellectual truth, are set down as First Lessons for children; —as though, because a child was born after Bacon and Franklin, he could understand them of course. . . . Using incomprehensible reading-books draws after it the inevitable consequence of bad reading.¹

Other passages might be quoted from this significant report, but perhaps enough has been repeated to indicate the fact that in the middle of the last century it would have made little difference whether printing presses had been improved or not. The all-important fact of mental history stands forth: reading was not well taught. The pupils who went out from the schools of that day were not fluent, intelligent readers. The expectations of society with regard to the attainments of the individual were slight, and the use in after-life of the art of reading was correspondingly meager.

It would, of course, be out of keeping with the facts to assert that defects of the kind described by Horace Mann made no serious difference in the lives of men and women in 1840. But such a statement is much more nearly true of that time than would be a statement that today we can look with complacency on the crudities of our treatment of reading in the schools. In 1840 the average citizen was called on very little to read. His political affiliations were fairly direct; he usually voted for representatives whom he knew. His correspondence was very light; and the contacts of his daily life were simple. It is not unqualifiedly true that it made no difference at all whether he could read or not, but it is true that he was required to use the art very little in his ordinary routine.

Just in the degree that modern life has become complex and dependent on reading does the obligation of the schools increase. Any charge that can legitimately be made against our modern teaching of reading is therefore of gravity proportionate to the modern demand.

What are the charges that one finds expressed in current comments on reading? Again and again it is said that the reading of pupils is formal and that the content of the books used in the schools to teach reading is so exclusively drawn from the literary classics that it fails to appeal to pupils.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

There are elaborate phonetic systems which have been worked out as substitutes for the spelling which Horace Mann criticized. Not infrequently teachers and pupils become so absorbed in these phonetic systems that the class exercises in the schools are devoted wholly to pronunciation and very little, or in some cases not at all, to productive interpretation.

School systems grade pupils on their ability as oral readers only to find that children who seem to stumble in their oral reading can very often use textbooks in geography and history equally as well as those who excel in oral reading.

Conversely, school systems report that there are frequent cases in the upper grades of pupils so deficient in reading that they are blockaded in the use of the textbooks from which they are supposed to learn the facts of geography and history. Devices for remedying the defects thus exhibited by many upper-graders are eagerly sought by teachers and parents, and it is frankly acknowledged that some of the cases are so baffling that the school is not able to correct the defects.

It is not difficult to find in schools the most grotesque survivals of the formal methods of earlier days. The writer has heard teachers telling pupils to stop when they come to a punctuation mark and count one if it is a comma, two for a semicolon, and three for a period. He has heard teachers tell children that when reading about an angry crowd they should raise their voices so as to exhibit the type of emotion described in the text. All of this took place, not in remote rural schools, but in the elementary schools of urban districts.

Perhaps the cardinal criticism which can be made against the method of teaching reading common in the modern school is the criticism that the only type of reading which is ordinarily made a matter of classroom instruction even today is oral reading. This is the obvious and natural form of reading with which one must begin in the primary grades. It is retained as the daily exercise in many sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, although for nearly fifteen years the importance of changing in the upper grades to silent reading has been reiterated again and again in all of the books on educational methods and in all of the prefaces of reading

books. Oral reading is traditional and is entrenched in the school program. It does not prepare one to read rapidly one's newspaper or one's correspondence, but the practical need is pushed aside because the school has its modes of procedure, borrowed from an earlier age.

Fortunately, the defects which have been cited are by no means universal. There are many examples of improved methods of work in modern schools. Indeed, the reforms which followed the drastic criticisms of Horace Mann can be traced with clearness through the four decades following his report. Mann advocated the abandonment of the A.B.C. method which was the universal method of teaching reading up to his time. He advocated the adoption of the word method, and by 1880 this method had gained many advocates, and during the decade of the eighties it was adopted by most progressive schools.

Mann had advocated the use of simple language suited to the understanding of children and the use of interesting stories rather than high-sounding phrases. Slowly his advice began to affect school practice. In 1850 McGuffey prepared his readers which through forty years were very extensively used in schools, not only as the textbooks for reading classes, but also as the basis for the classification of pupils. McGuffey put into his readers simple stories which were interesting to pupils. His language, too, was within the reach of children. He did not have the courage to carry his innovations far enough to dissociate reading altogether from the traditional spelling, but the emphasis is on meaningful reading rather than on formal exercises.

McGuffey not only put simple and interesting stories into his readers but also graded the material by actually trying it out on children. He called in the pupils of the schools in the neighborhood and read his selections to them. He then put a given story into the reader intended for children of the age corresponding to the age of the children whom he discovered by his trials to be interested in the story.

Interesting stories taught by the word method constitute a new school subject as contrasted with the reading that Horace Mann criticized in the report from which extracts were quoted in the earlier

paragraphs of this article, but this fact that new methods and new content have in reality transformed the subject into something new has never been fully realized by the rank and file of the teaching profession. We hear reading called the chief of the three R's exactly as it was in 1850. The ordinary teacher demands a reader as the means of giving instruction. If the teacher is told that she might very much better prepare her own reading lessons out of the experiences of the pupils, she feels that an unbearable burden has been put upon her. If she is asked to use current material of some sort, such as magazines or daily papers, she feels that there is confusion in the mind of the one who makes such a suggestion, between what may legitimately be expected of the elementary school and what is to be expected of the high school where a more advanced form of training ought to be provided.

The appeal which ought ultimately to reach the thinking of our elementary-school teachers is the appeal for a recognition of the fact that the expansion of the elementary school brings pupils to the point where an advanced form of training is absolutely legitimate.

Let us put the case thus. In 1840 the average child went to school 450 days. It was possible in this brief period to advance him to the point where he could read orally a few selected passages. Instruction in that day was limited because of lack of books, lack of training on the part of teachers, and other untoward conditions. In 1922 the pupil is carried far beyond the point to which his grandparents could be expected to go in 1840. The modern pupil will have at the end of the third grade all of the rudiments of reading that the average child of 1840 gained in his total schooling. The important question now is what is to be done with the surplus time and energy that come to the school as a result of expansion.

Perhaps it will be pointed out that our present-day pupils read more. This is undoubtedly an advantage, but it should be asked whether this *more* contains any new kinds of reading. It is doubtless useful for a pupil to read a hundred short extracts rather than twenty-five, but if the books which are put into his hands contain only short extracts, how is he to gain a taste for the long, coherent perusal of a full volume which is a higher type of reading? More reading ought to include the reading of books as distinguished from

the reading of mere extracts. It is not enough to give pupils more and more textbooks all made on the same plan. The textbook which is a book of extracts ought to be superseded by a book of another kind. Reading passes into a new stage when it passes beyond the extract epoch; it becomes a new subject of study and requires a new method of teaching.

What the modern school will have to learn is that expansion of school opportunity calls for the invention of some new kinds of teaching and some new kinds of pupil-activity.

There will be opposition to this kind of reconstruction of the school from many sides. The eight grades of the elementary school have always been thought of as a unit. The purpose and, in the main, the procedure throughout this unit have been fairly uniform.

The makers of textbooks do not like to depart from their well-established practices. To be sure, they have come to be aware that upper-grade readers do not sell as well as primers, so in recent years a great many sets of readers have been completed only through the lower grades. But if the book-makers do make an upper-grade reader, it is of the same type as the primer because it seems easy to make all books of a group on the same plan. The upper-grade book is a little larger and contains stories and extracts with longer words and harder sentences, but it is still a typical, conventional reader.

Has not the time come for something new? Children are bored beyond degree by the failure of the grades above the primary to give them in the reading class what they crave, a new and larger intellectual world into which they may enter with enthusiasm. Vaguely, perhaps, but with readily defensible intention, pupils know there is something wrong with the present situation which is a patchwork of partial reforms. Many of them leave school knowing that there is something which they need but cannot find in the traditional school.

The reader of this article is perhaps asking that all of this argument for a new kind of reading be brought to a concrete conclusion by some explicit statement of a sample program which may be considered as a basis of judging the feasibility of reconstruction.

One hesitates to jeopardize a general principle by turning attention to a program which may be a mere clumsy embodiment of that principle. By way of apologetic introduction to the concrete program briefly outlined in the following paragraphs, it is therefore proper to say that the implications of expansion are in no wise bound up with any particular program. Expansion means reconstruction. During the early stages of expansion, minor additions and minor revisions may satisfy immediate needs, but the time is sure to come when expansion will lead to fundamental revision of practice. Particular programs which are aimed at the accomplishment of these fundamental revisions are to be thought of as experimental efforts. They will vary in character. Indeed, there may be more than one such program that will serve to satisfy the demand.

A program that has the virtue of recognizing various stages in the child's development and providing for some of the earlier of these different stages by a series of different kinds of exercises is as follows: In the first grade begin with simple sentences which are given for the purpose of acquainting the pupils with the written forms of words which they know in oral form. Before the end of the first grade, call the attention of the pupils to the details of the written words and to the relation of the detailed parts of the written words to sounds. During this period of phonetic drill, keep the children's interests centered, for the most part, not on the details of the form of the words, but on the meaning or story. Supply many stories which interest the child and repeat again and again the same word forms until he becomes thoroughly familiar with the appearance of a number of words. Begin training the pupil in reading to himself.

The work of the second and third grades is similar to that outlined for the first. As soon as possible, however, a new feature should be introduced. The written words should begin to carry new meanings beyond those which the child contributes from his oral use of the words; that is, there should be recognition of the fact that the pupil soon passes out of the stage where his mind moves from the oral word to the written word and finds complete satisfaction in setting up a relation between the two. What the pupil needs is some new and interesting meaning derived from the printed

words themselves. This new meaning he gets in new stories. By the end of the third grade the pupil should be able to read silently for information simple matter of wide variety.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades should be devoted to the widest possible range of informing reading. This program is for the pupils who have made the desired progress during the first three grades. There will be some slow readers and some backward pupils in every grade. They must be treated apart from the group as a whole. They are remedial cases.

The program thus outlined calls for much silent reading in Grades IV to VI. It should aim also with the conscious co-operation of the pupils to establish a number of types of reading. There is the reading for the story, and a wholly different kind of reading to fasten in their minds details of what is read.

Incidentally, it may be remarked that a number of the standard reading tests used in the schools make the grievous blunder of censuring pupils for not reading a passage in such a way as to extract some intricate detail. The fact is that this is not reading of the ordinary type—it is a special form of highly analytical reading. The best readers are not those who use this highly analytical form of reading on all occasions. The best readers are those who are equipped with a number of types of reading and know when to apply each type.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth grades should give experience in three or four of the simplest varieties of reading. They should certainly train in rapid silent reading for the purpose of understanding the story. They should train also in the reading of simple informational passages in such a way that the reader fixes in mind the details of information supplied by the passage. Such reading is exemplified by descriptive passages in geographies. They should train, in the third place, in the reading of simple arguments. They should probably give some training in the rapid reading of passages for the purpose of selecting important single items.

The program here outlined calls for the use of a library rather than the ordinary reader as the source of reading material for these grades. There is no possibility of giving training in various types of reading unless the pupils are brought into contact with a large

body of material made up of long consecutive readings, such as can be found only in books as distinguished from mere excerpts.

What is intended by this series of suggestions is to make clear the principle that in purpose and method intermediate reading is different from primary reading. By the time the pupil reaches the seventh grade, he will have a number of kinds of reading at his command and will have made progress in perfecting several of them.

The program of the school of 1850, or even of a much later period, did not permit any attention to the cultivation of a variety of reading habits. Schooling was limited and meager, and teachers were satisfied if they taught the fundamentals of the reading habit without attempting any refinements. Expansion has brought the opportunity of introducing a new type of instruction; not only so, but expansion has brought a duty as well as an opportunity. Expansion is not alone a matter of the development of the school. Social life and economic conditions have expanded, and the fourth, fifth, and subsequent years of school have become something that they never could have been in earlier days. If teachers blindly continue to teach in grades beyond the third as though there were no new task imposed on them by the expansion of the schools, they fail to understand one of the most significant principles of modern social organization.

It is perhaps unnecessary at this time to carry the suggested program into the upper grades. Enough has been said to establish the argument. It will be the effort of subsequent papers to bring out the full implications of the argument as it applies to the seventh and eighth grades.